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AUTHOR	Lachance, Laurie, Comp.
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ABSTRACT

This digest defines drug abuse and examines ensuing family problems, methods of intervention and treatment, school related problems, and prevention of chemical dependency. (BH)

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IN BRIEF

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An Information Digest From ERIC/CAPS
Educational Resources Information Center
Counseling and Personnel Services

Adolescent Substance Abuse: Counseling Issues

The personal and social damage that substance abuse inflicts on young people compels the school, the family, and the nation to develop new strategies for treatment and prevention.

Definition/Incidence

Drug abuse can be defined as the use of any chemical substance that causes physical, mental, emotional or social harm to a person or to people close to him/her. In this country, the level of drug use among young people is the highest of any developed country of the world:

- An estimated 3.3 million teenagers are alcoholics.
- About two-thirds of our youth have tried an illicit drug at some time before graduating from high school.
- Many children who are into heavy drugs by the age of 17 have started as early as age 11.
- One-third of all suicides, regardless of age, are alcohol related.
- Estimates of the annual national cost of drug abuse are close to $100 billion.

Family Problems

In a chemically dependent family, members may unwittingly encourage drinking behavior, and each individual becomes affected by the growing dysfunction of the dependent person:

- THE CHIEF ENABLER, often the spouse or parent, is usually the one the substance abuser depends on most. This family member becomes more and more responsible for the family to make up for the substance abuser's lack of control.
- THE FAMILY HERO is especially sensitive to the family's problems. Feeling responsible for the pain of its members, the hero tries to improve the situation by trying to be a success in an environment outside the home.
- THE SCAPEGOAT does not work as hard as the hero to achieve recognition. He/she pulls away in a destructive manner, by getting into trouble, getting hurt, or just withdrawing.
- THE LOST CHILD offers relief for the family by taking care of personal problems and avoiding trouble. The family ignores the child, who is then left to face problems alone.
- THE MASCOT provides relief and humor for the family, masking his/her own pain and loneliness.

Intervention

Intervention is a means of uniting a substance abuser's significant others, since one of the abuser's defenses is to divide those who are close to him/her. An intervention geared to motivate the abuser to seek help includes the following principles:

- The important persons in the abuser's life write down specific data about events and behavior involving the abuse.
- Each person tells the abuser in a non-judgmental way how he/she feels about what has been happening in his/her life.
- If the abuser refuses all treatment options, the family must insist on an answer to "What happens if you can't quit?"
- If the person agrees to seek help immediately, help should be available.

Treatment

Substance abusers usually have long histories of abuse, extremely strong defenses against change, and relatively little ability to follow through on commitments. Group counseling offers the opportunity for these clients to learn that their concerns are not unique. In addition, substance abusers are known to be dependent and manipulative and to use the defenses of denying, blaming, and rationalizing to excuse their abusive behaviors. A group, especially one in which other abusers recognize and confront these defenses, is more likely to cut into them than is the individual counselor working alone. The group offers both support and confrontation, and resocialization begins to occur.

School Problems

Management of drug use within the schools has been in the authoritarian mode: known drug users are suspended or expelled from school and often are turned over to law officials. This "law and order" approach, however, does not address the underlying problems. Schools have also responded to the drug problem with their most available tool — education. Unfortunately, large doses of factual material do not deter youngsters from experimenting with drugs. Scare tactics and incorrect or misleading information succeed only in reducing the school's credibility with students.

Prevention

Reducing the misuse of drugs has been identified as one of the 15 health objectives for the nation, with adolescents as one of the target areas for service and research. Intervention categories for this area include: alternative activities, drug education, media influence, social skills development, values clarification, health promotion, life skills development, community involvement, and social-psychological understanding. The goal of current research is to expand our knowledge about how existing prevention programs actually operate, which programs have been effective and why, and whether these programs are transferrable to other settings.

Compiled by Laurie Lachance, Abstractor, ERIC/CAPS

List of resources available upon request.

ERIC Counseling and Personnel Services Clearinghouse
2108 School of Education, The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259 (313) 764-9492

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